DRISCOLL

Willie Driscoll was commissioned through AOCS and joined VF-96 for a combat cruise in 1971. Following his tour with that squadron, he served with Top Gun as a staff member before transitioning to the F-14 with VF-124. He made two cruises with VF-2, then returned to VF-124 as an instructor. Cdr. Driscoll left active duty in 1981, and affiliated with the Naval Air Reserve, serving with VF-301. He has 1,200 hours in the F-4, and 2,000 hours in the F-14. He recently retired from the Naval Reserve as a commander, but still maintains liaison with the Navy Fighter Weapons School as a guest lecturer. He is presently a commercial real estate broker in the San Diego area.

Approach: *Thorough knowledge of your aircraft and its systems is always stressed as a prime factor for surviving in combat. During your 1972 combat cruise, and especially during the 10 May engagements, how did your knowledge of the F-4 help you?*

Cdr. Driscoll: You go into a combat situation thinking you're well prepared, but during your first few missions you find you had no idea what you were getting into. It's dramatically different from what anyone has told you. The major thing I had to deal with – as do most combat aviators – is what we call the outer stratosphere of tension and anxiety, trying not to come unglued in a life-or-death situation. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying it isn't absolutely critical to know and understand procedures and NATOPS. But what happens to you in combat is so far removed from the NATOPS trainer that your daily surface consciousness fades. Your backup consciousness, which is all you have left, has to be absolute as far as your basic knowledge of the aircraft and tactics is concerned. Your surface consciousness will be tampered with in combat.

I made up cards, with boldface and

Lt. Cunningham and Ltjg. Driscoll return to their ship after being rescued on 10 May 1972.

Shortly before their eventful flight on 10 May 1972, Lt. Cunningham (r.) and Ltjg. Driscoll share a lighter moment during a preflight brief on board the *Constellation*.

tactical problems; I was always reviewing quizzes. I wanted to know the material cold, but I found combat is such a stressful thing in terms of how I had prepared myself. In retrospect, I should have spent much more time working on my basic procedures. During combat, intimate knowledge of NATOPS doesn't shoot down bandits, or prevent them from shooting you down. What is involved is the fundemental makeup of the man, his aggressive spirit, his will to live and win, and his ability to correctly execute basic tactical procedures.

Approach: *Would you say that today's RIO does not have to be as aggressive as the pilot, but more knowledgeable about the systems?*

Cdr. Driscoll: I believe that for the best pilot-RIO team, both crewmen have to be psychologically aligned the same way. You need intensely dedicated, aggressive RIOs, especially in combat. It is critically important that the RIO have that same sense of enjoyment about the work. I always looked at it with a cold, detached, unemotional approach. When I had the chance, watching a bandit explode was a thrilling experience.

Approach: *What can you say about trying to keep yourself in position to be rescued while under fire during the post-ejection SAR effort on 10 May?*

Cdr. Driscoll: Well, when I entered AOCS, I was not a very good swimmer and was assigned extra instruction, subswim. At the end of AOCS, I was on swim hold. It was not a day at the beach. All the instructors helped us, but the effort had to come from us. One day I was really working hard in the pool, determined to get through, and the light just seemed to come on. The water didn't seem to be trying to push me down; it was really enjoyable. And that was it. I passed all the swimming requirements that morning.

During the mission on 10 May, we were hit by a SAM just south of Hanoi. Shortly afterward, there was heavy smoke and some fire in the cockpit. We didn't want to eject over land for fear of being captured. I knew the Navy's approach to water survival had helped me and I was confident of surviving an over-water ejection. I was more concerned with the remaining MiGs and other hostile fire.

As we floated down after the ejection, I got my mask and gloves off and secured them. Then, I got on the survival radio to broadcast our position. I was also able to wave at Randy to make sure he was OK. After I broadcast our position, I switched to the beeper and prepared to deploy my raft. I landed in the water about 15 minutes later. The landing could have been a replay of D-WEST training. I flipped over onto my back, and popped my koch fittings, just like in training. There was a little breeze, although I don't remember being dragged. Despite the dogfights and the SAM hit, with the D-WEST training I had received, the water entry was almost routine. (This is quite a statement for me to make since I had always hoped that, after an overwater ejection, I would land in water no deeper than my knees.)

Approach: *The SAR portion of your story has not been repeated as much as the aerial portion.*

Cdr. Driscoll: Well, the North Vietnamese sent two PT boats out to get us. I think they were just coming out to get two Naval Aviators, and didn't know what Randy and I had just done. We swam over to the raft with all our gear on. I saw schools of sea snakes, and I thought it would be prudent to get into my raft immediately. I was tired, and I was probably functioning on adrenalin. I pulled myself in, and relaxed for a moment. Then, I remembered the PT boats and got out of the black raft thinking I could hide behind it. (I couldn't see the PT boats because the waves were too big. Also, I was in quasi-shock.)

Approach: *Did you get out of any of your flight gear?*

Cdr. Driscoll: No, I kept everything on,

including my helmet, except for my mask and gloves. It was just like D-WEST at North Island. The helo put a swimmer in the water, while several Marines manned the machine guns.

We got right on the hoist and were hauled up into the CH-46. I wanted to stand up, but they told me to lay down and relax.

Approach: *What makes for a superior combat aircrew, communication, knowledge?*

Cdr. Driscoll: That's a good question. You'll find that sometimes your better crews in training aren't necessarily your best crews in combat. I think it's a combination of things. Combat, first and foremost, is such a heavy trip, a place you've never been before; it is laden with tension and anxiety – shooting, people crying on the radio, getting sick; it's hard to put into words. Real confidence in your abilities is fundamental to your survival.

You develop this confidence first in training, doing the same thing over and over again. In the fighter community, you sometimes see guys with a lot of swagger and arrogance. Many times, those people don't do well in combat. I always felt the confidence to look for was the real confidence, someone who knows what they're doing because they've done it over and over. Also, one of the keys is not to get bored with yourself doing the same basic thing over and over. That always helped Randy and me.

Kills in combat are produced not by great moves, but by avoiding or trying to minimize bad moves. You'll make bad moves – what I call gross mistakes, but your enemy will, too. You want to capitalize on his mistakes and kill him. Try to never let a poorly flown bandit live. You want to continually work on minimizing the number of bad mistakes you make in training. None of this stuff about going up in the sun, dropping the flaps, reversing – that's stuff you read in books or see in movies.

Approach: *Is there anything else you can tell us?*

Cdr. Driscoll: I always read *Approach* when I was on active duty. There's a lot of excellent information in the magazine. As a matter of fact, Randy and I may not have survived that SAM hit I described if we hadn't read an article by then-Lt. Duke Hernandez. The article dealt with handling an F-4 after it sustained major battle damage to the hydraulic lines.

Hernandez recommended that aircrews faced with a similar problem severely restrict stick input when trying to control the aircraft's attitude. He felt the F-4 should be controlled by rudder only. In that way, the aircraft might fly a little longer before depletion of the hydraulic system.

That's exactly the same situation we faced after the SAM hit. We still had 25 miles to go before "feet wet," and we used Hernandez' technique by doing a series of barrel rolls with no G. That's one of the main reasons I've always considered *Approach* a must-read for every Naval Aviator. It's fundamental to being the true professional you want to be.

– Peter Mersky

Rushed back to the U.S. after becoming aces, Lt. Cunningham and Ltjg. Driscoll visit with Navy Secretary John Warner (l.) and CNO Elmo Zumwalt (r.)

During ceremonies establishing VF-1 and VF-2 in October 1972, Navy Secretary John Warner awards Navy Crosses to Lt. Cunningham and Ltjg. Driscoll.